



# **{ Talking to kids about prescription drug abuse**

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As a parent you're concerned about your children's health and well-being. You teach them about crossing the street safely and about personal safety. You talk with them about the risks of using tobacco, alcohol and other illegal drugs. But did you know that one of the fastest growing threats to youth today is the abuse of prescription and over-the-counter (OTC) drugs? Did you know that nearly one in five teens (19 percent or 4.5 million) nationally report intentionally abusing prescription drugs to get high, and one in ten reports abusing cough medicine to get high (Partnership Annual Tracking Survey, 2005)?

**Attitude drives behavior. Many teens and adults have a false sense of security about prescription and**

**over-the-counter drugs: "They are medicine, so they are safe."** This attitude leads teens to believe that using these drugs is not dangerous, or at least not as dangerous as using drugs like methamphetamine or heroin. This in turn leads them to believe that using a medicine without a prescription once in a while is not harmful, that abusing prescription pain killers will not cause addiction and that getting high from cough syrup isn't risky.

There are additional reasons for these attitudes: Aggressive marketing builds awareness of product availability, but not negative consequences of misuse or abuse, and messages about "appropriate" use do not educate people about the negative outcomes.

Many parents and other adults don't understand the behavior of intentionally abusing medicine to get high and are not discussing the risks of this behavior with their children. Using medicine to get high is no safer than abusing alcohol, marijuana, cocaine, methamphetamine or other illegal drugs.

According to the Partnership for a Drug-Free America, **teens who report that they learn a lot about the risks of drugs from their parents are up to 50 percent less likely to use them**, yet fewer than one-third of teens say they “learn a lot about the risks of drugs” from their parents.

**Parents have a strong influence on the choices their children make**, and by taking time to be informed and talk

with their children about prescription and over-the-counter drug abuse, they have an opportunity to help their children make healthy choices.



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# Why are teens abusing medicines? The four “A’s”

**Availability** The sheer number of prescription and OTC medications that have potential for abuse is staggering, and they are being used more frequently which increases availability.

**Access** They are easy to get.

- **Off the Internet:** The Internet has become a widely used tool for gathering information, shopping and recreation. It also is the host to many Internet pharmacies, some of which do not require a prescription and have no way to block young people from using the site. With a credit card, kids can purchase just about any prescription drug they want.
- **From the family medicine cabinet:** Medicines that are legitimately prescribed for a family member — mom, dad, grandparent, sibling — can be stolen a few at a time, usually without notice.
- **From friends:** Young people steal medications from their families and share or sell them to others. In a phenomenon known as Pharm Parties, kids

bring whatever medications they can find and mix them together in a type of pill “trail mix” and take them, often without knowing what they are using.

**Awareness** Teens know more about prescription drugs than ever before because advertising and the Internet have made them more visible.

**Attitude** There is the belief that less risk is associated with using prescription and OTC medicines even though they can be just as dangerous as any illegal drug if used inappropriately.



## Commonly abused prescription and OTC drugs

The most commonly abused prescription and OTC drugs fall into these categories:

### Opioids

Narcotic painkillers (for example Morphine, Codeine, oxycodone)

### Stimulants

Prescribed to treat narcolepsy and attention deficit or hyperactivity disorder (for example Adderall, Ritalin)

### Central nervous system depressants

Used to treat anxiety and sleep disorders (for example Xanax, Valium)

### Dextromethorphan (DXM)

A cough suppressant

## Talking about prescription and OTC drugs

Talking to children about prescription and OTC drugs is as important as discussing alcohol, tobacco and illegal drugs. Many of the teaching techniques are the same, but talking about OTC and prescription drugs poses unique difficulties. It's hard to think about the home medicine cabinet or the Internet as a potential source of drugs.

Yet, this is often where these drugs come from. This is NOT about children mistakenly taking the wrong medication or the wrong dose. This is about kids intentionally using

prescription and OTC drugs to get high. When they are used this way, they are no less dangerous than any illegal drug.

It can be fairly simple to tell a child that he or she is not allowed to use alcohol, smoke cigarettes or take methamphetamine; After all, these drugs are illegal for youth and have little or no medical value. **It can be much harder, especially when children are young, to teach them about the difference between safely using a medication and abusing one.**

# Tips for dealing with prescription and OTC drugs

**Preschool** At this age, children tend to view drugs in simple terms: “good” versus “bad,” and they are also eager to know and memorize rules. They are old enough to understand simple concepts but they’re not ready to take in complex facts.

- Encourage health and healthy habits.
- Telling children this age that medicines are drugs can be very confusing. Instead simply explain that medicine can be harmful if it’s not taken the way it’s supposed to be. Illustrate this by reading the label on a medicine bottle.
- Model healthy behavior regarding your medicines. Take only prescriptions that are prescribed for you and use OTC medicines only when needed. If you are taking a prescription or over-the-counter medication in the presence of a child, take only the amount prescribed or directed.
- Admonish children never to put anything into their mouth if they don’t know what it is. Kids this age can’t tell the difference between candy and medicine or other potentially dangerous things.



- Teach them never to take medicine, candy or other things they might put into their mouths from someone other than you or someone to whom you’ve given permission such as a grandparent, teacher or doctor. Make sure your child knows you’ve given that person permission.
- Keep all medicine, vitamins and similar products out of reach. Consider keeping them in a locked cabinet.

**Reinforce that your children should only take medicine that's given to them by you or someone to whom you've given permission.**

**Kindergarten through grade three (5 to 8 years old)** At this age, kids have an increased interest in the world beyond home. They are beginning to see ads about prescription and OTC drugs on television and may hear people talking about them.

- Explain that prescription and OTC medicines are drugs that can be taken when a person is sick or has an injury, and when they are taken properly, they can be very helpful. Explain that they can be harmful when misused.
- Use “teachable moments” while watching television or when taking medications to talk about how these drugs can be harmful or dangerous.
- Reinforce that your children should only take medicine that's given to them by you or someone to whom you've given permission such as a grandparent, babysitter, doctor or school nurse.
- Explain what alcohol, tobacco and illegal drugs are.
- Help children learn that it isn't always necessary to take medicine when they don't feel good. If they have a headache, for example, eating something or lying down for a while might make them feel better.
- Praise your children for taking good care of their bodies and avoiding things that might be harmful.
- If your children take medicine during the school day, make sure they know that the nurse or other school official will give it to them, and that he or she has your permission to do so.
- Continue to keep medications, vitamins and other similar products out of reach.

**Grades four through six (9 to 11 years old)** At this age, one out of every seven kids has been offered a drug. Now is the time to help children prepare to make the right decision. This is also an age when they are very curious about how the body works and are ready for more complex information.

- Take time to learn about prescription and OTC drug abuse so that you feel prepared to talk with your children about them.
- Talk with your children about why some people abuse prescription or OTC medications and other drugs of abuse.
- If you feel confident your knowledge is accurate, talk with your children about specific prescription and OTC drugs and how they might affect the user's body and life.
- Practice with them different ways of saying "no" when offered drugs by friends or others.
- Don't worry about having all the facts. It's more important that you express how you'd feel if your child used drugs and the impact it could have on your family.



- Be prepared to answer questions about whether or not you ever abused medicines or used other types of drugs.
- Establish clear rules and appropriate consequences regarding the use and misuse of any drug, including alcohol and tobacco. Monitor and enforce these rules consistently.
- Keep medications that can be abused in a locked cabinet.
- Remind your children that prescription and OTC medicines are drugs and can be just as harmful as illegal drugs if not taken when needed or as directed.



**Many kids this age overestimate the number of their peers who do drugs and may think they have to use them to fit in.**

**Grades seven through nine (12 to 14 years old)** At this age, kids are trying to both fit in and to establish their own sense of identity. They are increasingly exposed to drugs and drug use of all kinds and are more likely to see older kids doing drugs without seeing immediate negative consequences. Many kids this age overestimate the number of their peers who do drugs and may think they have to use them to fit in.

- Talk with your children about the immediate distasteful consequences of abusing prescription or OTC drugs such as vomiting, unwanted sexual behavior or not remembering what they did.
- Talk with your children about what their world is like, what they value and their future goals. Then ask them how engaging in unhealthy or risky behavior like using drugs would impact their dreams.
- Talk with them about how drug use might hurt good friendships or sabotage positive opportunities in their lives.
- Get to know your child's friends and their parents. Tell the parents your rules about drug use and discuss with them their rules.
- Keep medications that can be abused in a locked cabinet.
- Continue to remind your children that prescription and OTC medicines are drugs and can be just as harmful as illegal drugs if not taken when needed or as directed.

**Grades ten through twelve (15 to 17 years old)** At this age, teens have already had to make decisions about drugs and are increasingly seeing peers use drugs. They may be exposed to more situations that could involve drug use, and if they are working or driving, they have likely acquired a wider peer network than when they were young. This may lead to increased opportunities to use and riskier situations.

- Many in this age group are starting to focus on their future, so tell them how drug use can hurt their chances of landing a good job or getting into college.
- Be more specific about the consequences of abusing prescription or OTC drugs. Discuss the risks of taking drugs and driving, or riding with an impaired driver.
- Teens tend to be idealistic, so remind them how avoiding drug abuse can make the community a better place. Talk about the ways a person's drug use affects others and that drug abuse is not a "victimless" crime.
- Monitor prescription drugs and keep them in a locked cabinet if you have any concerns about them being abused.

## **For all ages**

- Make your values clear by setting a good example. Take the use of medication seriously and always use prescription and OTC drugs appropriately.
- Take inventory of the prescription and OTC drugs you have in your home. Do any of them have the potential for abuse? Properly destroy unused or outdated medicine. (Talk with your pharmacist about the best way to dispose of old medication.) Monitor pill quantities and medicine levels if necessary.
- Monitor Internet use in your home. It's very easy for anyone to purchase prescription drugs over the Internet.



- Use teachable moments throughout your children's lives to reinforce the information you've been teaching them about prescription, OTC and other drugs.
- Listen to what your children have to say, and listen closely. You'll learn a lot about what they think and already know about prescription, OTC and other drugs.
- Learn as much as you can about the abuse of prescription drugs, but remember that it's okay if you don't know all the answers. There are many sources of good, credible information. The most important thing is to have an open dialogue about all drugs and your expectations regarding their use. Tell your children how you'd feel if they made unhealthy or risky choices.
- Be sure that your child understands that sharing or selling prescription medication is illegal. In some cases it is considered a class C felony punishable by up to ten years in prison and a fine of up to \$10,000.

## Don't know how to start the conversation? Try asking questions.

"What have you learned or heard about prescription and OTC drugs?"

"What have you heard about kids in your school using prescription and OTC drugs to get high?"

"What's it like to be young today?"

"What are some of the issues you face?"

Take the opportunity to talk to your kids about prescription and OTC drugs. For more information, visit the Iowa Substance Abuse Information Center website at [www.drugfreeinfo.org](http://www.drugfreeinfo.org) or call toll-free 1-866-242-4111.



Information in this booklet was adapted from “Growing Up Drug-Free: A Parent’s Guide to Prevention,” developed by the Partnership for a Drug-Free America for the U.S. Department of Education.

## Resources

Iowa Substance Abuse Information Center  
1-866-242-4111  
[www.drugfreeinfo.org](http://www.drugfreeinfo.org)

National Institute on Drug Abuse  
[www.nida.nih.gov](http://www.nida.nih.gov)

The Partnership for a Drug-Free America  
[www.drugfreeamerica.org](http://www.drugfreeamerica.org)



For more information or a copy of this booklet, please contact the Governor’s Office of Drug Control Policy.

515-242-6391 ■ [www.iowa.gov/odcp](http://www.iowa.gov/odcp)

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